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Does Interdependence subdue Economic Voting in Europe?

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1 Introduction

Voters punish their government for overseeing an economic crisis. What is conventionally called economic voting (Key, 1961; Fiorina, 1981; Anderson, 2000; Andersen et al., 2013). This, as governments are generally perceived as being responsible for the welfare of their citizens. However, making such attributions of responsibility becomes more complicated, as the clear cut boundaries of sovereign power dissolves (Eichengreen, 2008; Keohane and Nye, 2001). As such, increasing economic and political interdependence between otherwise sovereign nations challenges the basic relationship between the economic fortune of the electorate and the electoral fortune of the government. Put in the form of a question: how are voters supposed to hold national governments accountable for their economic performance, when the economic situation is, in part, driven by forces which are no longer controlled by these national governments?

Nowhere is this question more relevant than in Europe, where a seemingly endless recession is taking its toll. For the first time since the Second World War the European economy has contracted significantly. One in every ten European is unemployed. In some countries it is more than one in five - a catastrophic proportion. At the same time, the European countries are the most interdependent in the world. Accordingly, most European countries have a high level of economic openness, capital mobility and last but not least a membership of the European Union. The most restrictive supranational organization in the history of the world (Andrews, 1994; Milner and Moravcsik, 2009; Keohane and Nye, 2001).

Consequently, history has placed voters of the European nations in a pinch: they desperately

need leaders who can solve the worst economic crisis in decades, but increasing interdependence has made it difficult for them to discern whether their current leaders are up to the job. The dissertation proposed here tries to understand how ordinary Europeans react to this interdependence problem of economic voting.

How does increasing economic and political interdependence affect the way European voters hold national politicians accountable for their economic performance?

In this proposal I sketch out a dissertation which seeks to answer this research question, by looking beyond the current economic crisis: examining how interdependence has influenced the electoral patterns of post-war European democracies the past fifty years.

The remainder of the proposal is organized as follows: First, I sketch out how the dissertation will contribute to the extant literature in particular, and to our understanding of politics in general. Second, I use existing rational choice models in conjunction with political economy literature on how interdependence affects national economies to derive some hypothesis about how the European voter's react to the interdependence problem. Third, I discuss the methods and data the dissertation will use to test these hypotheses. Specifically, I suggest that one might get around issues of internal and external validity by combining time series cross sectional (TSCS) data on European elections with a set of survey experiments. Using the TSCS data to delineate whether the hypotheses predict electoral behavior, and the experimental data to study whether they predict the electoral behavior for the "right" reasons. Fourth and finally, I turn to some practical considerations on the structure of the dissertation and how I hope to contribute to the research environment at the University of Copenhagen.

2 Contributions of the dissertation

The dissertation will look into one of the most fundamental questions of contemporary political science – what are the consequences of growing interdependence for democratic polities – and try to answer it from a novel angle: namely, by studying electoral behavior.

This may seem odd. Conventionally, studying the effects of interdependence has been the

purview of political economists studying the influence of interdependence on economic performance (for example Obstfeld, 2001; Garrett, 1998). Or students of public policy, looking into the effect of interdependence on policy making and diffusion (Gilardi 2010; Case & Besley 1995). Or political institutionalists, studying its effect on the quality of democratic institutions (Rudra, 2005; Li and Reuveny, 2006).

While these approaches have presented us with sound knowledge about how globalization changes the social, economic and institutional features of modern democracies, the premise of this dissertation is that we do not know whether voters recognize and act on these changes. Whether voters take the effects of increasing interdependence into account when they vote.

This is a question of great importance, as it speaks to the continued democratic legitimacy of electoral decision-making (Bartels 2010). A legitimacy which rests on voters ability to hold bad leaders accountable for bad decisions (Achen and Bartels, 2004b,a). If voters no longer have this possibility under conditions of economic and political interdependence, one of the arguments for democracy is nullified: More competent decision making will no longer be a *fait accompli* of electoral democracies (Anderson, 2007). Further, this potential disconnect between electorates and those they elect may have several democratic sideeffects, such as a decreased feeling of efficacy, or a decreased trust in government - leaving the already low trust in European governments even lower (Eurobarometer, 2012).

Apart from giving some insight into the continued viability of electoral decision making as an effective mechanism for ensuring democratic legitimacy, the dissertation will also provide empirical foundation for discussing several important political issues. By examining whether voters are able to effectively hold their own nation state accountable for their welfare in the face of growing interdependence, the dissertation will add to the debate on whether globalization demands stronger global institutionalization. Whether it makes sense to look at how alternative political structures, such as the European Union, can be held politically accountable for the welfare of European citizens as a whole (Achen and Bartels, 2004b). Finally, the dissertation will help us understand what economic information voters find informative when assessing the competence of their political leaders. This knowledge will give political candidates and political journalists a normative foundation for presenting economic information: namely, by focusing on what informs

voter decision-making. Further, this knowledge may also help independent economic think-tanks, such as the OECD or the Danish Economic Council, to focus their analysis (or at least their presentation) on economic factors which voters can use in an electoral context.

3 Interdependence and Economic voting: Theory and hypotheses

Below this dissertation proposal will try to form some tentative expectations about how increasing economic and political interdependence affect the tendency among voters to punish their governments in bad economic times, and reward them in good times. The section is divided into three subsections. The first introduces the core assumptions and core prediction of economic voting. The second critically examines these core assumptions under conditions of increasing interdependence, leading to the first hypothesis: that growing interdependence decrease the use of absolute national indicators as a guide on Election Day. The third and final subsection then discuss how we may tweak these assumptions to make them more congruent with interdependence, leading to the second hypotheses: that voters use comparative economic information in stead, benchmarking national economic outcomes across borders, to take interdependence into account.

The assumption underlying the hypotheses made in this section, is that voters are rational decision makers. The reason for making this assumption is twofold. First of all, most landmark works on economic voting use a rational choice approach (Downs, 1957; Key, 1961; Fiorina, 1978; Salmon, 1987; Lewis-Beck, 1990; Alesina and Rosenthal, 1995; Besley and Case, 1995; Duch and Stevenson, 2012). Accordingly, using rational actor assumptions gives the dissertation a sound and well defined theoretical platform. Second of all, the rational choice approach often entails the epistemic advantage of making very clear point predictions (Schotter 2006). This, as the rational choice voter lives in a very simple and stylized environment, making her reactions to the interdependence problem quite easy to predict.

3.1 The central tenants of Economic voting

The theory of economic voting can be summed up by two related assumptions, which allow us to make a prediction about how voters act on Election Day. The first assumption is that political leaders vary in how competently they handle the economy (Alesina and Rosenthal, 1995, 188-203; Ferejohn, 1986; Duch and Stevenson, 2012, 131-148). Competent politicians are able to improve economic conditions, whereas incompetent politicians make them worse.

Where economic conditions can be understood as some general indicator of welfare – most often GDP per capita. The second assumption is that voters are able to (at least on average) infer how competently politicians handle the economy by extracting a competence signal from looking at their own economic conditions (Downs, 1957; Fiorina, 1978, 1981). Accordingly, the theory suggests that rational voters will prefer to have a competent politician in office as this increase their expected utility. Following from these assumptions, the essential prediction becomes that voters reelect incumbent politicians when economic conditions during the incumbent's term have improved (Kramer, 1971; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Kiewiet, 1981; Paldam and Beck, 2000; Paldam and Nannestad, 2012; Duch and Stevenson, 2012; Alesina and Rosenthal, 1995; Borre and Andersen, 1997). This ensures, in turn, that incompetent leaders have a short shelf life in democratic politics – whereas competent ones get reelected.

3.2 When the competence signal gets too noisy: The interdependence problem

Now let us throw some interdependence into the mix. In the introduction of this dissertation proposal I suggested that, due to increasing economic and political interdependence, voters in contemporary Europe could no longer simply use past economic conditions to determine how competent their leaders were. Below this argument is fleshed out.

Most students of political economy agrees that - almost by definition - increasing interdependence constrain the relationship between the competence of politicians and the economic conditions of ordinary citizens (e.g. Mishra, 1999; Moses, 2000; Eichengreen, 2008). Economic openness makes it harder to perpetrate fiscal policy (Mundell 2001), increased capital movement makes it necessary for national policies to diverge (at least somewhat) in order to attract capital

(Andrews, 1994), and increased international cooperation puts a strain on some forms of national regulation (Keohane and Nye, 2001). As I mentioned in the introduction these conditions are especially descriptive of the European nations.

Following this point, increasing interdependence reduce voter's ability to extract a meaningful signal about an incumbent politician's competence from their own economic conditions. As the proportion of variation in economic conditions which stems from international forces increase, the probability that voters can correctly infer incumbent competence from these economic conditions become severely reduced (Alesina and Rosenthal, 1995). This can be shown formally (Duch and Stevenson, 2012, chap. 5), but should also be pretty intuitive: when the effect governments have on the economic situation is small relative to international shocks, it becomes hard to trace the direction and size of the government's effect, by simply looking at the aggregate economic situation.

If the relationship between government competence and economic outcomes decrease, and the ability of voters to extract a meaningful competence signal from the remaining effects is reduced, the core assumptions of economic voting laid out above is severely challenged. How does this change the essential prediction: that voters punish governments when the economy turns sour? Recall, that voters preferred having a competent politician in office as this increased their future expected utility. Accordingly, voters reacted to changes in economic conditions during an incumbent's term in office, because they believed they could infer from these economic conditions how competent leading politicians were. As the probability of inferring competence from changes in economic conditions is reduced, so is the motivation for reacting to these economic conditions. Accordingly, as competence becomes more difficult to infer from economic conditions, voters should focus less on these economic conditions and more on other factors (e.g. redistributive or ideological concerns). This leads to the first hypothesis, which I will investigate in the dissertation.

Hypothesis 1: Voters respond to increasing political and economic interdependence by relying less on national economic conditions when deciding whether to reelect the current government.

3.3 Different signals: Solutions to the interdependence problem

Now let us look at how the European voters might try to get around the problem related to interdependence by looking at different economic information.

Previous research in economic voting has shown that voters do not weigh all information about the economy equally when trying to assess competence. Rather they single out certain indicators which they respond to (Paldam and Nannestad, 2012; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979). In most empirical explorations researchers have found that voters primarily care about GDP per capita, unemployment or inflation (in descending order of empirical importance) (Kramer, 1971). There are a couple of different reasons for why a voter might choose to focus on a given indicator: it may be the only one which they have information about (Zaller 1992), they might care especially about the development in certain indicators (i.e. the indicator has a large influence on their expected utility) or they might see the indicator as more informative with regards to competence. The latter being what is interesting for the dissertation.

Little research have explored whether voters weigh economic indicators based on how informative they are with regards to the government's competence (for a notable exception see Alesina et al. 1993). Even so, rational voters should – all else being equal – weigh efficient and unbiased indicators more heavily when trying to infer competence. Accordingly, as interdependence increase European voters should not simply shy away from economic indicators of incumbent competence all together, but start to look around for *different* economic indicators, which take the role international forces play in shaping national economic outcomes into account.

This may seem quite abstract. What alternative indicators can take interdependence into account?

One alternative is comparative information. Instead of evaluating economic conditions in absolute levels, voters can look at differences in economic conditions between their own country and a country which is equally affected by international economic forces. That voters may evaluate how competently governing politicians perform by using comparative information is not a new idea (Salmon, 1987; Rogoff and Sibert, 1988; MacKuen et al., 1992; Kayser and Peress, 2012). However, none of the previous studies have linked the use of comparative information explicitly with increasing interdependence. Nevertheless, comparisons make it possible for voters to dif-

ference out the effects of international forces, leaving them with a signal which is (on average) proportional to the difference in competence between their own leaders and the leader of the compared country. This presents voters with a signal, which is related to competence, yet unrelated to the effect on international competence. Accordingly, growing interdependence should spur voters' interest in how they are doing compared to other European countries.

This leads us to the second hypothesis I will investigate in the dissertation.

Hypothesis 2: Voters respond to increasing political and economic interdependence by relying more on the comparative economic conditions of their country when deciding whether to reelect the current government.

4 Research Design: Studying the Interdependence problem

In this section I lay out the methodological approach of the dissertation. Namely, how I will try to test the hypotheses derived above. Basically, I will approach the hypotheses from two angles. Using existing time series cross sectional data (TSCS) on European elections and economic conditions, and by designing and conducting a set of small-scale survey experiments.

Why is this type of methodological triangulation necessary? Even though we can use the TSCS data to test whether and how interdependence affects voting behavior, any aggregate level effect might be mediated by a causal mechanism which differs markedly from the one stated in the hypotheses. Specifically, the survey experiments can investigate whether voters, on an individual level, actually concern themselves with how interdependent their country is, and how well it performs economically, when deciding whom to vote for. Put differently, the two data sources give me the best of both worlds. The observed economic and electoral data gives the dissertation external validity, whereas using experimental data gives the dissertation internal validity.

The two different data sources and the two hypotheses structure the empirical explorations of the dissertation, *see table one*. Below we shortly describe how we will test each hypothesis using both the TSCS data and the experimental data resulting in a total of four studies. The studies are described in some detail, to make it evident how the dissertation will approach testing the hypothesis.

Table 1: An overview of the four studies embedded in the dissertation		
	H1: Effect of interdependence	H2: Use of Comparative information
TCSC data	Study one	Study three
Experimental data	Study two	Study four

4.1 Testing the first hypothesis: Does interdependence work as a moderator?

The first hypothesis stated that voters respond to increasing political and economic interdependence by relying less on national economic conditions when deciding whether to reelect the incumbent government. In order to test this hypothesis, I will investigate whether changes in economic and political interdependence moderates the relationship between economic conditions and the electoral support for governing politicians. As such, the key will be to discern whether increasing interdependence reduce the effect economic conditions have on the incumbent’s vote share.

Study 1: To test how voters respond to increasing interdependence, study one will interact observed TCSC country-level data on economic outcomes with indicators of interdependence in a statistical model predicting electoral support for the incumbent government. Unlike previous comparative studies of economic voting, study one will use a country fixed effects approach, utilizing within country variation in the indicators of interdependence, the economy and election results (see for example Whitten and Powell, 1993, or Anderson, 2000). This is done to improve the causal interpretation of the estimated effects. Differences in economic voting is measured by how strongly changes in absolute national economic indicators affect the incumbent government’s vote share.

Following previous comparative literature, I will use growth in GDP per capita and unemployment as the primary economic indicators (Kramer, 1971; Erikson, 2009; Andersen et al., 2013). Interdependence will be measured using a host of different indicators, in order to investigate whether a robust pattern in interdependence’s effect on economic voting appears (Hellwig and Samuels, 2007; Hellwig, 2008). For instance looking at whether a relatively small and increasingly open economy such as the Danish has seen a larger reduction in their level of economic voting, than larger and more closed economies such as Germany or France. And whether voters in coun-

tries with high levels of capital mobility, such as Britain and Switzerland, have lower levels of economic voting than countries with less flexible and more densely regulated financial sectors.

To further improve causal inference study one will also focus on indicators which have a discontinuous development. Indicators which capture “shocks” to the level of interdependence in a country, and consequently can work as a quasi-experiments. One such indicator could be membership of the European Union.

Study 2: To investigate whether the causal mechanisms underlying hypothesis one is an adequate approximation of how voters reason, study 2 will use a set of vignette survey experiments. The survey experiments will present subjects with a set of economic information about a hypothetical country (A) run by a hypothetical government. Based on this information voters are asked to report how likely they would be to reelect the hypothetical government. The use of fictional political entities allows me to control and manipulate the economic information voters are able to take into account, while sidestepping any ethical concerns related to deception (Tomz and Van Houweling, 2008).

I have previously used this methodology to identify some of the causal mechanisms which underlie economic voting (Larsen, 2013). While the experiment will be most effective if it is completed using a representative sample, it could work with a convenience sample as well.

Taken together study 1 and study 2 will get us closer to understanding whether and why interdependence affect voters reliance on conventional indicators of incumbent competence such as GDP per capita growth. It will thus deliver the first piece of the puzzle which motivated this dissertation: namely, whether increasing political and economic interdependence change the way voters hold their political leaders accountable for economic hardship.

4.2 Testing the second hypothesis: Is there an effect of economic comparisons?

The second hypothesis proposed that voters would rely on comparative economic information to infer political competence. An indicator which is less sensitive to international economic fluctuations. In order to test this hypothesis, the dissertation will look at whether and how voters respond to developments in their own economic conditions relative to that of other countries.

Study 3: The third study will examine the second hypothesis using the same TSCS data sources as study 1. However, instead of looking at absolute levels of economic growth and unemployment it will look at cross-country differences. The main independent variable will be differences in unemployment and economic growth between European countries and the dependent variable will be electoral support for the government.

Study 3 will not just look at *whether* voters act on comparative economic information, but also whether they do so in response to increasing interdependence. This is important, as social psychologists have documented that people are intrinsically predisposed to make social comparisons (Mussweiler and Posten, 2012; Festinger, 1954). Consequently, voters may already be comparing their own countries' economic conditions to that of other countries. Even in the absence of interdependence.

In order to investigate whether interdependence drives the use of comparative information, study 3 will look at what type of countries, voters are most likely to compare their own country with. Of special interest will be, whether voters compare themselves with countries which are similarly affected by the world economy. Accordingly, if voters use comparative information to “partial out” the effect of the international economy, this is the type of countries they should use in their comparisons (Salmon, 1987). We would expect Danes, for instance, to compare Danish economic conditions with those in a country like Sweden, which is also (relatively) small and has a very open economy, and not Germany - which is affected differently because of its size - or Norway - which is affected differently because of its reliance on natural resources.

Study 4: The purpose of study four will be to investigate whether voters use alternative indicators because they find these indicators more informative to incumbent competence under conditions of interdependence. In other words, whether the causal mechanism underlying hypothesis two is valid. It will use a vignette-survey experiment just like study two. Accordingly, it will present economic information on a hypothetical country (A) run by a hypothetical government, and ask subjects how inclined they are to vote for the hypothetical government based on this information. However, it will be somewhat more complicated than study two as it will also entail some comparative economic information: This might be economic information on an equally interdependent country “B”, an OECD statement about country A's economic policy relative to

others or a third type of comparative information.

Taken together study three and four investigates whether voters are able to regain some insight into how aptly their government perform, when conventional economic indicators become less informative due to increasing economic and political interdependence. And accordingly, whether democratic polities can continue to rely on their electorate to insure competent leadership.

5 Getting the job done: Some practical considerations

5.1 Advisor and contribution to the research at UCPH

My preferred advisor would be Professor Kasper Møller Hansen, Professor Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard or Associate Professor Peter Dinesen. Their knowledge on different aspects of the project would all be valuable (Dinesen, 2013; Nørgaard et al., 2012; Kurrild-Klitgaard, 2001; Kurrild-Klitgaard and Berggren, 2004; Hansen and Bech, 2007; Hansen, 2007). Especially Kasper Møller Hansen's previous work on the competence of citizens and experimental methods in relation to economic voting (Hansen & Bech 2008) along with his current work on how the economic crisis affect voting behavior (Andersen et al., 2013) would give me a profound knowledge of the methods I want to use, and the field in which I wish to publish.

Further, I would hope to learn from and contribute to the vibrant research environment at the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen.

Specifically, the dissertation is in line with several current research projects at the Centre for Elections and Parties. The focus on how people use economic experiences to shape their vote choice would thus fit nicely with the project undertaken by Rasmus Tue Pedersen on how people perceive numerical frames, and the project undertaken by Asmus Olsen on historical and social reference points in citizens evaluations of performance measures. However, this project will also be able to draw lines to non-political behavior research conducted at the department. For example, understanding how the premises of national elections change, when interdependence increase would be of interest to the work done by Professor Marlene Wind, Professor Ben Rosamund and post.doc Julie Nielsen on the democratic antecedents and implications of European integration.

5.2 External Stay

A semester as visiting fellow at the Nuffield College, Oxford University, would be highly beneficial. I have previously had a short stay there, where I was taught by Professor Raymond Duch. He is currently doing research using experimental methods in relation to certain aspects of economic voting (Duch et al., 2012), and his advice would surely strengthen the dissertation.

5.3 Qualifications

My professional experience and prior education has provided me with the qualifications necessary to carry out this PhD project. While these are mentioned in the attached CV, three factors are especially important to note.

First, I have had experience with doing independent research. I have published two co-authored peer-reviewed papers, and have several papers under review at the moment (see CV). In these papers I have collected and analyzed unique data, and contributed theoretically and empirically to the field of voting behavior. While this project is distinct from my former research, it relates to it, in that it seeks to understand how voters deal with an increasingly complex information environment.

Second, I have a broad knowledge of the field of voting behavior and the methods I wish to use as part of the dissertation. I was thoroughly introduced to political behavior, when I attended the Stanford Summer Institute in Political Psychology, and have since written several papers on voting behavior in conjunction with classes taken as part of my first year as a master student. Further, working as a research assistant at the Ministry of Finance has provided me with some experience in dealing with aggregate level economic and political data. Further, I have attended a course on experimental at the University of Oxford, and have perpetrated several survey-experiment with student samples.

Finally, my methodological skills have been persistently honed by teaching undergraduates in methodology for the past three years. Third, I have attended a number of international academic seminars, both as part of my summer schools and at the University of Copenhagen and have peer-reviewed several chapters of an anthology on Political Marketing. As a consequence, I have become accustomed to reviewing and critiquing academic work.

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